

Viewing Cultural Exchange from Mughal Paintings

Elsa Sneha Thomas

Abstract: *The Mughals had established an empire in Indian subcontinent and brought the Persian art and culture to the subcontinent. And then over a period of time the Persian elements were associated with the indigenous and European style of painting. These different indigenous and foreign elements helped the genre to flourish. Despite of this blend of various cultures the Mughal painter successfully maintained the distinct of the Mughal School painting. In this way Mughal tradition of painting received a pan-Indian character. So the essay would attempt to elaborate these different styles and discuss over the events of cultural exchange which left their profound impact on the Mughal paintings and enriched the artistic culture of India. But some of these paintings have political dimension as well. For example-the 16th century European allegoric tradition influenced Jahangir and he formed his own political allegory which has been clearly manifested in the paintings of that era.*

Keywords: Mughals, Persian art, cultural exchange, Mughal School painting, artistic culture

1. Introduction

The Mughals were basically Central Asian people; but the way they assimilated with the subcontinent's culture that it's difficult to discuss about the Indian history without the reference of the Mughals. The extraordinary journey of this dynasty began in the year 1526 AD, when Zahiruddin Mohammad Babur laid the foundation of the Mughal kingdom in the subcontinent; and since then that rule continued up to the nineteenth century. And thus the Mughals brought the Central Asian art and culture in the subcontinent.

Scholars have studied and admired the Mughal paintings for a long time. The paintings are closely associated with the rulers of the dynasty. Therefore they are essential elements for a better understanding of the imperial ideology and also in some cases they reflect the broader cultural issues of that era. "Artistic individuality" and the painter responsibility for the individual "patron's demand" were two key factors of the Mughal painting.¹ For their activities the Mughal artists were completely dependent on their royal patrons. But despite of that regulation they were in a better position than the court historians and poets.² Apart from this, the paintings are valuable source to brought light in some of the undiscovered areas which don't contain any written materials; for example in his memoir *Jāhāngīrnāma*, Jahangir has written very little about Europe; even the name of Sir Thomas Roe (envoy of King James I of England) has not been mentioned, who spend two and a half year (1615-18) at his court. But Jahangir's interest about Europe has been expressed through the paintings.³ So in this way the paintings reflect the ruler's mind through which one could easily assume the importance of painting in the Mughal state.

So the above instance a fact could be assumed that in Mughal court painting was an essential sphere of cultural exchange, which led to the creation of a distinct form of

painting. Hence Mughal painting could be viewed as a melting pot where styles of various cultures have assimilated; and contributed in the development of a new style.

Early Phase of the Mughal School of Painting

Mughal painting evolved under the patronage of the Mughal emperors and the higher nobility, which reflect the refine taste and grandeur of the Mughal court. For nearly three centuries this genre of painting survived.

Libraries were essential for the Muslim ruling households of Central Asia; and these were not simple repositories but in most of the cases these libraries were book making centres. Books were exchanged and presented in various ceremonies and even they were considered as a desirable part of war pillage. And Babur, a fifth generation descent of Timur⁴ was not an exception; along with the zeal for conquest he inherited the interest for books also. In his memoir *Waqi'at-i Baburi* (written in Chaghatai Turkish language and later translated into Persian under his grandson Emperor Akbar) the emperor depicted about an event of exploring Ghazi Khan's "book-room" after his victorious battle in Panipath (1526) against Ibrahim Lodi. He praised the books of that library and sent some valuable pieces to Humayun and Kamran. So books were not only essential entertainment but also the symbol of wealth and power; especially the elaborately illustrated ones. For the art historians like Milo Cleveland Beach, Babur's personal taste mainly his insightful description of nature documented in *Bāburnāma* (the Persian translation) is a convincing reason to assume that he patronized painters.⁵ Surat-khana, "a gallery with painted walls" was constructed sometimes between 1504 and 1519 at his behest; this strengthens the above argument and proofs the existence of a certain painting culture at Kabul during his reign.⁶ His four regnal years (1526-1530) in India were unstable and obviously for that he could not establish himself as a patron of painting in India; but his legacy of cultural appreciation was passed down to his successors.

¹Anjan Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting* (Roli Books, 2008), p. 21.

²Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), xxiii.

³Ibid, p. xxvi.

⁴Milo Cleveland Beach, *Mughaland Rajput Painting* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 48.

⁵Ibid, 18.

⁶Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, p. 34.

In 1530 after Babur's death his eldest son Nasir-ud Din Mohammad Humayun (r.1530-1540; 1555-1556) accessed the throne. Along with the throne Humayun inherited the love for books from his ancestors, and he also developed a taste for painting. But it was not a strong empire which Babur left behind. Humayun's brothers Hindal and Kamran and above all an Afghan leader Sher Shah were the constant threats for his throne. It was Sher Shah who ousted Humayun from power and forced him to flee towards Punjab. But his brother Kamran blocked Punjab and Kabul, so he moved towards Sind and finally he received refuge from the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp II (r.1524-76). Though Tahmasp had his own political ambitions to fulfil but it was with his help Humayun captured Qandahar in 1545 and the Kabul. And after the death of Sher Shah, he recaptured Delhi and Agra.⁷

In the Safavid court Humayun was very impressed with the Persian tradition of painting and calligraphy. On the other hand Shah Tahmasp was gradually becoming an orthodox and because of that his interest for art was gradually decreasing. So Humayun invited two renowned artists of the Shah's atelier, Mir Sayyid Ali of Tabriz and Khwaja Abd us-Samad of Shiraz. Tahmasp's orthodoxy encouraged the artists to seek patronage elsewhere; and for that some other Iranian artists also joined the Mughal court, such as Dust Muhammad and Maulana Yusuf.⁸ So in this way, within a phase of turmoil Mughal school of Painting was formed.

In terms of style and compositions Mughal painting appeared in the popular form of the Safavid court in Tabriz, initially. For example, the artists brought the methods for painting production; most importantly the use of *tarḥ* or detailed preparatory sketches. Otherwise new techniques of adding colour and production of coloured and decorated papers were also introduced in India, mainly by the artists of Mashhad and Herat.⁹ Gradually the Mughal style evolved and mingled with various other styles but the Mughal emperor's always remained enthusiast about the Persian style. Priscilla Soucek opines that the Timurid legacy was the essential reason behind that long-lasting interest.¹⁰

Mughal Painting under Akbar and his Successors

Humayun was succeeded by his son Jalal-udDin Muhammad Akbar (r.1556-1605). Mughal Empire reached at the pinnacle of its glory under Akbar. And because of his initiatives the imperial Mughal atelier received an independent identity. Along with the throne he inherited his father's artistic workshops and books of the imperial library as well. Though Akbar was illiterate but he had a retentive mind which was curious too. Regular reading sessions were organised for his enjoyment and possibly suitable images used enliven those sessions. So perhaps that encouraged him to sanction orders for manuscript illustrations.¹¹

Akbar was firm believer of cultural and religious synthesis and interestingly that also became a dominant feature of Mughal miniatures since the period of his reign. From his time indigenous painters began to join the atelier also. Paintings of this era began to reflect a blend of Indian and Iranian style, which was the result of an exchange between the two groups of painters. *Tutināma* is the earliest manuscript possible to attribute to Akbar's reign. It's basically an anthology of short stories told by a parrot to its mistress for fifty-two successive nights to prevent her meetings with her lover during husband's absence. This manuscript comprises the Persian and indigenous styles. Pre-Mughal Hindu elements such as slightly softer outlines, organic proportions of female figures were added; and the patterns of trees are more similar with the earlier *Bhāgavata Purāna* Manuscript. Also the illustration of *Devotee's Daughter Restored to Life* (Fig.1) from *Tutināma* follows the early-16th century style of the Laur-Chanda manuscript.¹² So the Mughal idiom began to take shape from the *Tutināma* manuscript and that idiom appeared in its earliest form in the *Hamzaāma* manuscript. It's a great example of fusion between the Persian and pre-Mughal North Indian and even Deccan style. This cultural blend is possible to observe in painting also. As the refined tonal values were the Persian traits and preference for the warm vermillion, yellow, dark green and rich chocolate manifests the proximity with the *Chaurapañchāshikā* group.¹³

Persian art of calligraphy was also very famous in the Mughal court. Especially the works of Mir 'Ali al-Haravi was highly recognised among the Mughal elitist circle. Abu'l Fazl depicted him as a perfecter of calligraphy; and 'Abd al-Baqi praised him more eloquently by calling him "the qibla of scribes (*qibat al-Kuttāb*)". Actually the prime reason of Mir 'Ali's appreciation in Mughal India was for his skills in writing the nasta'liq script; which was favoured in the Timurid Herat. And because of this admiration for his works the Mughal artists imitated both his style of nasta'liq script and his scheme of arranging texts on a page.¹⁴ Mir 'Ali's works received more fame in India because of the initiatives of his son Mir Muhammad Baqir, who established a link with India. As most of the calligraphies of Jahangir's *muuraqqa's* are from an album originally set by Mir 'Ali and brought to India by his son. Other manuscripts copied by Mir 'Ali transmitted to India by Mir Baqir for his another patron 'Abd al-Rahim Kahn-I Khanan.¹⁵

Akbar encouraged sub-imperial patronage and these Mughal elites such as Kahn-I Khanan had their own personal ateliers; therefore these sub-imperial works were also important sphere of cultural interaction and exchange of styles.

It was an interesting turn for Mughal painting when it was exposed to European painting. So 1572 was the year when Akbar first encountered with the Europeans at Cambay; Abu'l Fazl recorded that incident. Then six years later

⁷ Stuart Cary Welch, *The Imperial Mughal Art*, (New York: George Brazilliar, 1978), p. 14.

⁸ Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, p. 35.

⁹ Priscilla P. Soucek "Persian Artists in Mughal India: Influences and Transformations" *Muqarnas* 4 (1987), pp. 166-167.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 166.

¹¹ Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, p. 36.

¹² Beach, *Mughal and Rajput painting*, pp. 21-23.

¹³ Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, p. 38.

¹⁴ Soucek "Persian Artists in Mughal India" p. 167.

¹⁵ Soucek "Persian Artists in Mughal India", 169.

Akbar invited the Jesuits at Mughal court. The Jesuit missionaries presented Akbar a copy of the eight volumes *Royal Polyglot Bible*, printed in Antwerp between 1568 and 1573 by Christopher Plantin.¹⁶ But this was not the first time when the Mughals interacted with European art; as in 1522 in a letter Humayun described about the gifts sent to Khan of Kashgar. There he mentioned about images painted with Black ink by Europeans; which according to Laura Parodi were prints.¹⁷ Though the printed images of the Bible impressed Akbar very much but the best influence of European art could be viewed in the paintings commissioned by his son Emperor Jahangir.

In 1585 the capital moved from Fatehpur Sikri to Lahore where Akbar lived between 1585 and 1598. The most luxurious volumes of Mughal style was produced within this period. In 1600 prince Salim left the court and for Allahabad. There he set his own atelier and employed renowned artists such as Aqa Riza, his son Abu'l Hasan, Mirza Ghulam and their trainees. Characteristically works produced in Allahabad and Agra both used to share certain common pictorial ideas and the growing interest for *muraqqa* (patchwork album) compilation among both the patrons was an essential factor; which added a new dimension in the Mughal paintings.¹⁸ But the Allahabad period was a short phase soon after the death of Akbar prince Salim ascended the throne as Emperor Jahangir.

Like his father Jahangir was not interested in manuscript production therefore under his reign the production of *muraqqa*'s increased. Also the art of portraiture, which his father promoted at first, was highly recognised during that period.

The pre-existing remained in the Jahangiri atelier; but then the most interesting experiment had happened with the tradition of European allegory. This inspired the monarch so much that he created his version of political allegory which has been clearly manifested in the miniatures of that era.

The *Polyglot Bible* presented to Akbar is a very essential factor for this political allegorization. The first title page shows the title of the Bible arranged in architectural frame and the page closes with an assembly of four animals-ox, lion, lamb and wolf; which is known as *Pietatis Concordiae* (**Fig 2**). According to Max Rooses, the image was to signify the union of nations under Christianity. And the second title page shows an allegoric representation of King Phillip-II of Spain (the patron of the Bible)-*Pietas Regia* (**Fig.3**); a woman crowned with a laurel wreath by a putto and surrounded by various attributes".¹⁹ The woman is basically Phillip-II who has been represented as the protector of Catholic faith. Now the use of animals as a symbol is basically a part of the old Islamic painting tradition; which has been incorporated in the Mughal writings as well. The earliest example is Khwandamir's *Qanun-i Humayuni*;

where he uses similar metaphors, such as- "...deer sleep carelessly in the lap of panthers..."²⁰ Interestingly Mughal emperors were desperate to prove this metaphorical fact; as Jahangir in his autobiography mentions that under his reign wild-beasts behaved like a home-bred wander among the people without harming anyone. Ebba Koch also assumes that Jahangir and Shah Jahan kept tame lions in the court to prove the concept of *Pietatis Concordiae*.²¹

Ebba Koch also compares the *Pietas Regia* image and the image of Jahangir standing on a globe and shooting the head of Malik Ambar. She shows that Jahangir shooting his enemy reflects the annihilation of heretics drawn in the *Pietas Regia*. Also both the images depict the right side as the 'good side' where the ruler belongs. So according to Ebba Koch Jahangir and his artists found a way to express allegoric representation of ideal kingship; for which the earlier rulers were dependent on the literary sources only.²²

As mentioned earlier that portraiture also evolved under Jahangir's reign; especially the portraits of Jahangiridarbar, which was basically group portraits, were very popular theme. The European influence is visible in the Mughal portraits also. In this case one thing is worth mentioning that during that period the group portrait evolved in Holland also; and some eminent European painters like-Rembrandt were acquainted with the Mughal works.²³

After Jahangir Shah Jahan became the emperor and like his father he also inherited a flourishing atelier. Painting during the first half of his reign continued. But in the magnificent works like *Padshanama* new styles were incorporated. In the later half Prayag a master painter of his reign adopted incredible European techniques which is evident in his swirls and moves of pigments which he preferred to use while creating a greater sense of physical image and *chiaroscuro*.²⁴

His elder son Dara Shikoh was also a great patron of art. Mughal art could have been in the safe hands under Dara but he was murdered for the throne by his brother Aurangzeb. And under Aurangzeb religious prohibitions were imposed on art. So since then the tradition of Mughal painting lost the days of its immense glory. Obviously the painters migrated at the provincial courts in the hope of receiving patronage.

The tradition revived for a short period during Muhammad Shah's reign but that never be compared with the heritage of early Mughal painting.²⁵

Patronised at the Provincial Courts

Mughal paintings received patronage in the provincial courts since the early 1600s or even prior to that; especially in the courts of Rajputana and Deccan.

¹⁶Beach, *Mughal and Rajput painting*, pp. 53-54.

¹⁷Laura E. Parodi, "Tracing the Rise of Mughal Portraiture: The Kabul Corpus, c. 1545-55", in *Portraiture in South Asia since the Mughals: Art Representation and History*, ed. Crispin Branfoot, (L.B. Tauria & Co. Limited, 2018), 49.

¹⁸Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁹Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, p. 2.

²⁰Ibid, p. 2-3.

²¹Ibid, p. 126.

²²Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, p. 8.

²³J.C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) p. 378.

²⁴Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, p. 55.

²⁵Ibid, p.57.

Images:

او بصفت بدل آورد و علاج این عارضه است که این مریض را بدو از رشت
و جوب باری که بخندان میزند که حراری در باطن او ظاهر شود و بندها
مفاصل او کشاده گردد و قل رت خیر و شر و رت نفع فی ضرر

Figure 1: Devotee's Daughter Restored to Life, from *Tutināma* manuscript (**Courtesy:** Milo Cleveland Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting*)

[illegible]

Figure 2: *Pietatis Concordiae* or peace among the animals under the Messiah's rule, first title page of the Royal Polyglot Bible, published in Antwerp (**Courtesy:** Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays*).

So the elements of cultural exchange make it a hybrid form of art; and it would not be exaggerative to claim that the Mughal tradition of painting is the best manifestation of the heterogeneous culture of the Indian subcontinent.

²⁶Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, pp. 77-78.

²⁷ Cathrine Glynn, "A Rajasthani Princely Album: Rajput Patronage of Mughal-style Painting", *Artibus Asiae* 60, no. 2 (2000), p. 224.

²⁸Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, p.

388.

²⁹Chakraverty, *Indian Miniature Painting*, p. 71.

³⁰Ibid, p. 63.



Figure 3: *Pietas Regia* or King Phillip-II as the protector of Catholic faith, second title page of the Royal Polyglot Bible, published in Antwerp (Courtesy: Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology: Collected Essays*).

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